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(54) **Programmable test for memories**

(57) The test data are loaded in the memory (203) by means of a test access mechanism (102). The BIST hardware (303) generates a test algorithm in which each set of consecutive operations performed over the same memory address starts by a read. Any data read from the memory (203) are stored in a set of latches (401). The data stored in this set of latches are applied on the

inputs of a set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates (402). Each EXCLUSIVE OR gate receives a first input from the output of a latch and a second input from a polarity signal (P) generated by the BIST hardware (303). During a write operation, the outputs of the EXCLUSIVE OR gates (402) provide the data values to be written in the memory (203).

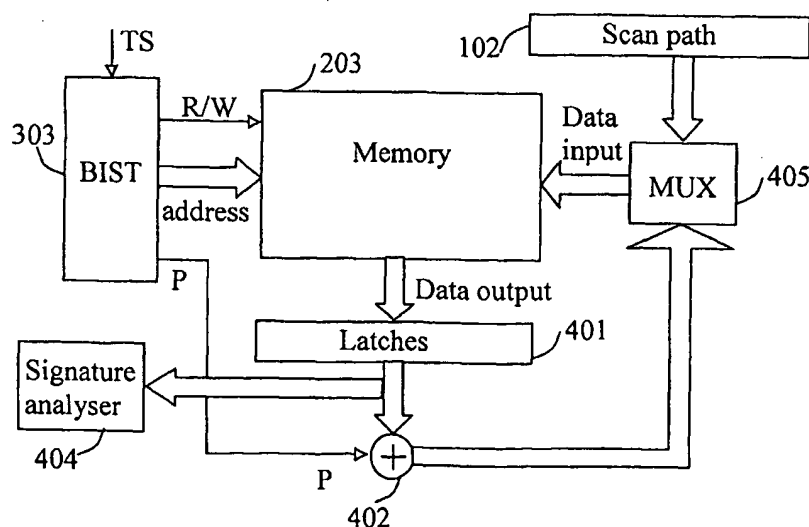


Fig. 3

Description

[0001] Today Built-In Self-Test (BIST) is the mainstream test technology for embedded memories. It has replaced the external testing of embedded memories because it solves some significant limitations of the latter, such as:

- the cost of test equipment for testing complex systems on a chip (SOC) that include both memory and logic,
- the difficulties for applying in a non-scan design the highly sequential memory test algorithms by propagating test vectors through the various blocks surrounding an embedded memory,
- the difficulties for applying one test per clock in a scan based design,
- the difficulties for applying test vectors at speed, caused by the lower speed of the external test equipment with respect to advanced chip designs, and by the long delays introduced by the interconnections of the board

[0002] The latter problem will be encountered even if we have implemented a direct access mechanism between the inputs/outputs of the embedded memory and the inputs/outputs of the chip, which can be done for instance by using a multiplexing.

[0003] Since the BIST hardware is implemented in the same chip as the memory, all these problems are not encountered. Thus, the BIST can be used for testing embedded memories at their operation speed. In addition, memory BIST reduce significantly the test cost of complex systems on a chip, since we can test the system on a chip the memory test by using an automatic Test Equipment (ATE) designed for testing logic designs. However, BIST has a significant limitation with respect to external test equipment. In fact, once the BIST hardware has been implemented, we can test the memory only by means of the test algorithm implemented in the BIST hardware. This is not a significant drawback for situations where the memory design and the fabrication process have been stabilized, and there is enough experience for determining the basic defect types encountered for a given memory design and fabrication process and for developing a test algorithm that can guaranty the detection of these faults by manufacturing testing. Unfortunately, in many other situations conventional BIST is not a convenient approach. Such situations are for instance memory debugging for determining the principal fault types related to a new memory design and fabrication process. This is necessary for modifying the design and/or the fabrication process in order to improve the fabrication yield, as well as determining the best test algorithm for the new memory design, in terms of fault coverage and test length.

[0004] Failure analysis on failed components returned from the field is another situation where the rigid-

ity of conventional BIST is unsuitable.

[0005] Due to these problems, many companies implement a memory BIST for achieving at-speed testing of embedded memories, and use multiplexing for creating direct access on the inputs/outputs of embedded the memories, in order to maintain the flexibility in terms of test algorithms offered by external test equipment. Thus, BIST based testing can be used for fabrication testing, while external testing can be used to apply any test algorithm required for debugging and failure analysis. However, the debugging and failure analysis of faulty components returned from the field will not be performed at speed, thus, reducing the efficiency of these tasks.

[0006] A solution for improving this situation is to implement a conventional BIST scheme that implements a large variety of test algorithms, but the cost of the BIST hardware can become prohibitive, and the test algorithms that can be executed after fabrication will be limited to those selected during the BIST implementation.

[0007] This invention presents a programmable BIST approach that combines the advantages of the Built-In Self-Test and external test approaches while eliminates their limitations.

1. Selection of test algorithm families for highly flexible and low cost BIST.

[0008] To achieve an at-speed highly flexible testing of embedded memories we will need to combine the intelligence of the external test equipment, for determining the test algorithm at any time after circuit fabrication, with the at-speed test application offered by the BIST approach. In fact, we must find a way to use the BIST hardware for applying a test algorithm that is determined by the external test equipment. This is a difficult task. In fact, since we are targeting a very high (if possible unlimited) flexibility, in terms of memory fault models that we can cover, we may need to implement a very complex BIST hardware, in order to be able to be program at any time after fabrication a large variety of memory test algorithms. The selection of the test algorithm families able to cover a large variety of memory fault models may impact drastically the cost of the BIST hardware. Thus, instead of starting from a large variety of test algorithms and then generate a programmable BIST able to implement these algorithms, we will start from a large variety of fault models and we will determine the variety of test algorithms which test these fault models and which can be implemented by a programmable BIST of minimum hardware cost.

[0009] The most widely adopted memory fault models include stuck-at faults, transition faults, coupling faults, dynamic faults, passive pattern sensitive faults, active pattern sensitive faults (some times also called dynamic pattern sensitive faults), static pattern sensitive faults, and retention faults ("Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John

Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991). Excepting the case of retention faults, which require some timing condition in order to be tested, the detection of any other of the above fault models can be achieved if we are able to provide certain states and perform certain operations over a set of memory cells. For instance, stuck-at faults require to write the 0 (1) state to each memory cell and read the cell. Transition faults require performing the following operations to each memory cell: write 0 (1), write 1 (0), and read the cell. A coupling fault requires to set the coupled cell to a certain value 0 or 1, perform a transition to the coupling cell, and read the coupled cell. Dynamic faults require performing repeatedly some operations on the memory cell.

[0010] March test algorithms (SUK D. S., REDDY S. M. - "A march test for functional faults in semiconductor random access memories", IEEE Transactions on Computers vol. C-30 n° 12 December 1981) are very popular since they are simple and can be used to detect a large number of predominant memory fault models, including memory cell faults such as stuck-at-faults, transition faults, various coupling faults and dynamic faults.

[0011] Read/write faults and most of decoder faults are also tested by these test algorithms since they can be modeled as cell array faults (NAIR. R. THATTE S. M., ABRAHAM J. A. "Efficient algorithms for testing semiconductor Random-Access Memories", IEEE Transactions on Computers, Vol C-27, pp 572-576, June 1978), (THATTE S. M., ABRAHAM J. A., "Testing of semiconductor random access memories" Proc. 7th International Symposium on Fault tolerant Computing, June 1977). More complex algorithms have proposed for other fault models such as static, dynamic, active and passive pattern sensitive faults.

[0012] Memory prototype debugging and failure analysis may require testing the memory with test algorithms able to detect any of these fault models. The variety of the test algorithms that can be used is very vast, since the above fault models are numerous, and there are several varieties for some of these fault models. For instance idempotent coupling faults, inverting coupling faults, linked and unlinked coupling faults are some classes of coupling faults (MARINESCU M. "Simple and efficient algorithms for functional RAM testing", IEEE International Test Conference, November 1982.), ("Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991). They correspond to a large number of test algorithms.

[0013] Dynamic faults are another example of faults requiring a large variety of test algorithms in order to be tested. For such faults the test algorithm depends on the transistor level design of the memory cell (static cell, dynamic cell, one-transistor cell, two-transistor cell, ...), the electrical characteristics of the cell, the type of the defect, and its electrical characteristics. These characteristics lead to a large number of test algorithms for testing dynamic faults. Other fault models can be tuned by several parameters (e.g. the number and location of

neighboring cells in neighborhood pattern sensitive faults). They result on several test algorithms for each type of pattern sensitive faults.

[0014] Different test algorithms are needed for testing other fault models, such as for instance bit-line couplings, or word-line couplings.

[0015] To be able to select during prototype debugging or failure analysis any of these test algorithms, and apply it at-speed, they must be implemented into the BIST hardware. Using a conventional BIST approach for implementing such a large number of test algorithms will result on a huge BIST hardware. In addition, even by implementing such a BIST hardware, the test algorithms that we could use, during debugging and failure analysis, will have to be chosen among the large but still limited number of test algorithms, selected during the BIST implementation. Thus, if we discover during these tasks that we need to apply some other test algorithms we will not be able to apply them. Programmable BIST is therefore much more adequate in this context, but it may result on a large hardware cost for implementing a large number of memory test algorithm families. It could be though to be a difficult, indeed impossible task to implement a BIST circuitry able to test the above mentioned fault models, and eventually a larger set of fault models. Clearly no BIST solution has been proposed for solving this difficulty.

[0016] To solve this problem efficiently we need to select carefully the test algorithm families, able to offer such large fault coverage. March test algorithms are very popular because they are simple and can detect a large number of predominant fault models such as cell stuck-at faults, transition faults, coupling faults, dynamic faults, faults in the read/write logic, and decoder faults. Due to their simplicity and the coverage of a significant set of fault models, they were selected in our programmable BIST approach. However, some more complex test algorithms have been proposed for other fault models, such as the pattern sensitive faults. Also, these algorithms can be quite different for different varieties of a given fault model. So, implementing this kind of algorithms in programmable BIST is not good solution. As a matter of fact, we adopted another approach, which employs simple test algorithms but combines them with an scheme that allows a high flexibility on the selection of the data backgrounds used with these algorithms.

2. Background-Based Testing

[0017] A march test algorithm consists on several march sequences.

[0018] A march sequence is a test sequence having a very regular structure. It performs at each memory cell the same sequence of read and write operations, using the same data.

[0019] Such a sequence addresses the memory cells one after another, following a given addressing order. Each time a new address is generated the fixed se-

quence of operations is performed on the cell selected by this address. This is repeated to all the memory cells. For instance a march sequence can perform the following sequence of operations at each cell (r_0, w_1, w_0, w_1, r_1). That is, we will perform a read 0, a write 1, a write 0, a write 1 and a read 1 before moving to the next cell for performing the same sequence of operations.

[0020] A march sequence is defined by the sequence of operations performed on each memory cell, and by order used for addressing the memory cells, which can be the up or the down order. In fact any addressing order can be selected. However, once this order is selected for a march test algorithm any march sequence of this algorithm will use this order (up order) or its reverse (down order). We can represent march test algorithms by using the notation proposed in "Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991). Thus, the notation

$\uparrow(w_0); \uparrow(r_0, w_1, r_1); \downarrow(r_1, w_0, r_0)$, is a march test algorithm consisting on three march sequences. The first sequence initialises all the memory cells to 0. The addressing order is meaningless in this sequence. The second sequence performs a read 0, a write 1, and a read 1 to each memory cell using an up addressing order. The third sequence performs a read 1, a write 0, and a read 0 to each memory cell by using a down addressing order.

[0021] We see that the march test algorithms are very regular, and thus easy to implement. In addition, they detect many predominant memory fault models (e.g. stuck-at, transition, coupling and dynamic faults). This regularity is natural and reflects the fact that each fault in a fault model may affect any of the memory cells. Thus, it is natural to repeat the same operations to each cell, since we need to test the same faults at all the cells. However, this regularity involves an important limitation. Consider a memory cell c_i and a set of memory cells S_j . Since, within each march sequence a given write operation writes the same data to all the memory cells, then when, we access the cell c_i at any cycle in the march test algorithm, the state of the cells S_j can have two possible values, a value A and its inverse.

[0022] Where, the value A is uniquely determined by the position of the cell c_i with respect to the cells of the set S_j within the addressing order of the march test algorithm.

[0023] The above limitation was described for bit-oriented memories. In word oriented memories we can use different word values in different march sequences. However, within the same march sequence, we can only use a single word value and its reverse. This constraint results on a similar limitation as with bit-oriented memories. Considering a memory cell c_i and a set of memory cells S_j , which are all at the same bit position of the memory words, then, when we access c_i at any cycle in a march test algorithm, the state of the cells S_j can have two possible values A and A. The state A being uniquely

determined by the position of c_i with respect to the cells of the set S_j within the addressing order of the march test algorithm.

[0024] Due to this limitation, march test algorithms cannot cover fault models involving interactions between more than two cells. Algorithms with more complex structure than march test algorithms are proposed for such fault models. In addition, not only the structure of the algorithm is more complex but also this structure can be very different from one variant of a fault model to another. For instance, Eulerian sequences, Hamiltonian sequences, the tiling methods, the two-group method, etc. "Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991), have been used to generate test algorithms for different pattern sensitive faults models and different configurations of the neighborhood cells. As another complexity, the sequence of operations performed by the test algorithms depends on the physical position of the cells in the memory cell array. This, in case of memories using address scrambling will require an additional circuit for mapping the logic addressing order generated by the BIST circuit, into the addressing corresponding to the physical implementation of the cells, as it can result by the address scrambling.

[0025] Clearly selecting this kind of test algorithms will result on complex test hardware and will offer a limited flexibility, since we need a quite different sequencing for each fault model case, which can not be generalized to cover fault models that were not considered during the BIST implementation.

[0026] To cope with these problems we have adopted a different approach, which uses programmable march test algorithms combined with programmable data backgrounds. By using a technique that allows a complete data-background flexibility (any data background can be selected for the memory cell array; we obtain a powerful programmable BIST at low cost. Since there is a huge number of possible data backgrounds (2^N data backgrounds for a memory with N cells), we must find a solution that allows maintaining low the cost related to the selection of any data background in such a vast data background space.

[0027] Let us consider the case of passive neighborhood pattern sensitive faults (PNPSF), to illustrate how works the test approach, which combines adequate march test algorithms with adequate data backgrounds to detect some complex faults. In a PNPSF faults we cannot perform a transition ($0 \rightarrow 1$, or $1 \rightarrow 0$) to a basic cell, when the set of neighbor cells are on a given state. Since, any of the possible states of the neighbor cells can be on the origin of the fault, we need to test the two transitions $0 \rightarrow 1$ and $1 \rightarrow 0$ of the basic cell for all the possible states of the neighbor cells.

[0028] In order to avoid using a complex sequence such as the Eulerian sequence combining with the tiling method for the case of the four cell deleted neighbourhood "Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and

Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991), we can determine several data backgrounds that load any of the possible sets of a basic cell and its deleted neighborhood cells with all the possible states. For instance for the four-cell deleted neighborhood we can create 32 backgrounds loading each base cell and its four-cell deleted neighborhood with the 32 possible states (see the above reference). Then, we can load each of these backgrounds in the memory and for each background we can execute an algorithm that detects the transition faults. For instance we can execute a test sequences that performs at each memory cell a transition followed by a read. We can see that by repeating this sequence for all the backgrounds and for the two transitions of each cell, we test all the passive pattern sensitive faults. Each base cell is tested for its two transitions 0→1 and 1→0 combined with each of the 16 states of its four-cell deleted neighborhood.

[0029] We observe that the test sequence performed for each background is a march-like test sequence, since it executes to each cell a transition followed by a read. The difference is that the write operation for performing the transition does not write the same value at each cell. This is because the write value is the inverse of the value loaded in the cell by the given background, which is not constant from one cell to another. The same observation holds for the read values. Thus, we have a greater complexity than in march algorithms, consisting on the loading the different backgrounds and controlling the non constant values of the read and write operations. The programmable BIST principle described in the present invention allows doing that with a low hardware cost.

[0030] The above principle can be used for the other types of pattern sensitive faults. For instance, data backgrounds combined with march-like algorithms, which detect coupling faults can be used to test active pattern sensitive faults, algorithms detecting stuck-at faults can be used to test static pattern sensitive faults, etc.

[0031] Obviously, this principle can be applied for any deleted neighborhood. What is changing changes for each type of deleted neighborhoods is the set of data backgrounds that we have to load in the memory in order to create exhaustive patterns to the base cell and its deleted neighborhood. For instance, for the eight-cell deleted neighborhood we can use the tiling-2 method or the two-group method for creating the backgrounds "Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991).

[0032] The present invention contemplates, by adopting a principle able to program any march test algorithm, to test the fault models involving a single cell (stuck-at faults and transition faults and a subset of dynamic faults), or involving interactions between two cells (coupling faults and the remaining dynamic faults). Then, by combining this approach with a technique able to perform these algorithms with any possible background we

will be able to test all the known models of pattern sensitive faults, and more generally any fault model involving interactions between more than two cells.

3. Programmable BIST for March Test Algorithms

[0033] Previous programmable BIST approaches for memories use a microcontroller architecture. Such architecture requires a memory for storing the microprogram that will perform a given march test algorithm. This memory has a certain hardware cost and in addition the number of march sequences of the march test algorithm is limited by the size of the memory storing the microprogram. The present invention describes a new programmable BIST architecture, which uses a single instruction per march sequences, and allows loading this instruction by means of a scan path. Thus, it eliminates the need for using a specific memory for storing the microprogram, and allows to perform march test algorithms containing any number of march sequences. Let us consider the following march test algorithm, as an example for illustrating the programmable BIST embodiment described by the present invention

$\downarrow (w_0); \uparrow (r_0, w_1, w_0, w_1); \uparrow (r_1, w_0, R_0, w_1); \downarrow (r_1, w_0, w_1, w_0); \downarrow (r_0, w_1, R_1, w_0);$

[0034] We will decompose the march test algorithms by using an hierarchical decomposition. In the highest level of hierarchy we have the whole march test algorithm. In the next level we have the march sequences composing it. In the next level we have the addressing order used within the march sequence. Then, we have the number of operations performed at each cell within the march sequence. Finally, at the lowest level we have the type of each individual operation and the data used by the operation. Our programmable BIST will use this decomposition. It allows a simple representation of the march test algorithms, leading to a simple hardware. Following to the above decomposition, the programmable BIST hardware for march test algorithms is composed of the following blocks:

- a register that holds at any given time an instruction that determines the march sequence under execution;
- an address generator that is able to generate all the memory addresses in increasing (up) and decreasing (down) order. This generator can be an up/down binary counter, an up/down LFSR, or any other counter able to generate all the addresses in increasing and decreasing order. A binary counter will be preferred for memories with incomplete address space;
- a comparator or a signature analyzer for test response verification;
- a controller that sequences the operation of the BIST hardware;
- a data register (to be used only in word-oriented memories) in which we load the data word to be

used during a march sequence.

[0035] The instruction determining the current march sequence is composed of the following fields:

- The up/down field (noted U/D). This is a single-bit field. It determines the address order to be used during the march sequence,
- The march sequence size field (noted as NO). It determines the number of operations performed during the current march sequence. This field has $\lceil \log_2 m \rceil$ bits, where m is the maximum number of operations of that march sequence, allowed by a given implementation of our programmable BIST. In our convention, the binary value 0 of this field will determine that we will execute a single operation in the march sequence (the operation O0). The binary value t of this field determines that we will execute $t+1$ operations during the march sequence,
- The m operation fields (noted O0, O1, ... Om-1). They determine the type of each individual operation of the march sequence. Each operation field will be a single-bit field if we want to implement only march sequence using two types of operations (write and read). It will have more than one bit if we want to implement march sequence using more than two operations (e.g. read, write, and read-modify-write),
- The m polarity fields (noted as P0, P1 ... Pm-1). Each polarity field is a single-bit field. It determines the polarity of the data to be written in the memory during a write, and the polarity of the data expected to be read from the memory during a read. The polarity for the read data is used if the rest response evaluation is done by a comparator. In bit-oriented memories, the polarity bit is equal to the value of the data bit. In word-oriented memories, a separate field holds the word data used during the current march sequence. The polarity bit determines at each cycle of the current march test algorithm if this word data is used on its direct or complemented form. Only the contents of the first $t+1$ pairs of operation and polarity fields are meaningful during the current march sequence, where t is the binary value specified in the field NO. The values of the fields Ot+1, Pt+1; ... Om, Pm, are don't care, since only $t+1$ operations are performed during the current march sequence.
- The data word field (noted as Data). This field is used for word oriented memories only). It determines the value of the word to be used (in its direct or complementary form) during the march sequence.
- The wait field (noted as W). This is a single-bit field. It determines if the operations (e.g. read, write) specified in the operation fields have to be executed during the present march sequence, or if instead, this operations will be replaced by non-operation (or

idle) cycles. This field is optional and is used if the programmable BIST has to offer the option of retention fault testing.

- The address mode field (noted as @mode). It is used to specify the mode of the address Counter, if the address Counter has some other modes in addition to the up and down mode.
- The address mode field (noted as @mode). It is used to the mode of the address Counter, if the address Counter has some other modes in addition to the up and down mode.
- The test end field (noted as TE). This field is a single-bit field. It determines if the current march sequence is the last sequence of the test algorithm. So, at the end of a march sequence having its TE field active, the BIST controller activates the march test algorithm completion signal. The value of the TE field does not necessarily need to be loaded in the last bit of the instruction. It can be loaded in the place of the Ot+1 bit, where t is the value of the NO field. The TE field is optional, because our BIST hardware generates a signal (the LM signal), which signals the completion of each march sequence. Since the global test controller of the chip knows that the BIST executes its last march sequence, it can use the march sequence completion signal LM, generated during the last march sequence, as the march test completion signal

[0036] The programmable BIST described in this invention can be implemented with a low hardware cost. The basic parts of the BIST hardware are the instruction register and the BIST controller. The BIST controller can be synthesized by using a tool for synthesis of finite state machines. Such tools are available commercially. The designer needs to provide the state transition matrix of the BIST controller, and the tool generates automatically the description of the BIST hardware. Instead of using this approach we will describe in details one of the possible implementations of the BIST hardware. This implementation is shown in figure 1.

[0037] The instruction register 1 holds the current instruction that determines the current march sequence.

[0038] The Address Counter 73 generates the address sequence in the up or the down order as specified by the U/D field of the instruction register. During each clock cycle of the test process, the Address Counter provides on its outputs the address of the current memory operation. The size of the Address Counter is equal to the number n of the address bits of the memory. The Address Counter can be implemented by any sequential circuit able to generate on a set of n signals all the possible 2^n binary values. In addition the Address Counter must be able to generate these values at a first order (up order) and at a second order (down order), which is the reverse of the first order. We can use for instance an up-down binary counter, an up-down LFSR, and up-down Gray code generator, etc. However, when the

memory is incomplete, that is, it uses only a subset of the possible 2^n address values to select all the existing memory locations, the binary counter is more convenient since it will address at a first time the existing memory locations. Thus, a circuit decoding the maximum address of the actual memory location can be used to stop the current march sequence when all the actual memory locations have been tested.

[0039] During each write operation of the test process, the Data Register 53 provides on its outputs the data to be written in the memory. During each read operation of the test process, this register provides on its outputs the data value expected to be read from the memory. This data value is compared against the actual data value read from the memory to verify its correctness. Another possibility is to verify the read data by using a signature analyzer. In this case the values present on the outputs of the Data Register during the read operations are useless. Very often the data words used in memory testing have a periodic structure. In this case the Data Register can have a number k of bits, which is lower than the number m of bits of the memory words. The k bits of the Data Register 53 will be expended into m bits as shown in figure 1. Also, in this case, the Data field of the Instruction Register 1 will have k bits only.

[0040] The outputs of the Control Register 63 provide during each cycle of the test process the control signals that determine the operation to be executed by the memory (e.g. a read, a write). The binary values used to code the memory operation in the operation fields of the Instruction Register can have the same formatting as the control signals of the memory. For instance for a memory having a R/W and a "mMemory Enable" control signals, then, R/W = 1, "Memory Enable" = 1 may code a read cycle, R/W = 0, "Memory Enable" = 1 may code a write cycle, and R/W = X, "Memory Enable" = 0 may code a cycle with no memory access. In this case, we can use two bits per each operation field of the instruction register and use the same coding as the control signal of the memory, for the read operation, the write operation and the non operation. It is also possible that we use another coding. For instance, it is possible to code only the read and write operations in the operation fields of the Instruction Register. Thus, we will use a single bit per operation field. In this case the signals O provided on the outputs of the MUX 32 must be modified to generate the actual coding of the memory control signals. A logic circuit to be said the Formatting block 62 will be used in this case to perform this modification. Another problem concerns the timing characteristics of the address, the data, and the control signals of the memory. It may be necessary to modify the BIST hardware in order to conform to the timing constraints of each memory design. These aspects are not considered in this invention. However, the hardware implementation presented in figure 1, provides to the memory under test address, data, and control signals that are ready from the beginning of each clock cycle. Thus, they should conform a

majority of memory designs.

[0041] The Address Counter 73, the Data Register 53, and the Control Register 63, are not specific to the scheme described by this invention. They are necessary for any memory BIST scheme. The Decode Logic 74 decodes the last address of the up sequence of the Address Counter and the last address of the down sequence of the Address Counter, and activates respectively the signals LU and LD when these addresses occur. In this example we consider the value 1 as the active value of these signals. This logic 74 also is not specific to this invention, since all BIST controllers need a signal indicating if all the addresses of the memory were visited by the current march sequence, in order to start executing the next march sequence.

[0042] The remaining blocks 1, 32, 42, 43, 44, 45, 52, 75, 76, 77, 82, shown in figure 1, are specific to the present invention, as they implement the unique sequencing related to the programmable BIST described by this invention, which is not based in microprogramming but instead uses a single instruction for programming each march sequence, of a march test algorithm. According to an aspect of the present invention, a Cycle Controller 32, 42, 43, 44, 45, provides, during $q+1$ consecutive cycles, the values of the first $q+1$ operation fields of the Instruction Register 1 to a set of signals O, and the values of the first $q+1$ polarity fields of the Instruction Register 1 to a second set of signals P, characterized by the fact that the values of the fields O0 and P0 are provided respectively to the signals O and P during the first cycle, the values the fields O1 and P1 are provided respectively to signals O and P during the second cycle, ..., the values of the fields Oq and Pq are provided respectively to the signals O and P during the $q+1$ cycle, where q is the value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register. According to an aspect of the present invention, the Cycle Controller repeats the above operation for each address generated by an address generator circuit 73. According to an aspect of the present invention, the Cycle Controller is composed of a binary counter 42, a multiplexer 32, a comparator 43, a D flip-flop 44 and an OR gate 45. The binary counter 42 counts during $q+1$ cycles from 0 through to q , where q is the value stored in the field NO of the Instruction Register 1. The outputs of the binary counter control a multiplexer 32 having m sets of inputs coming from the m operation fields of the Instruction Register 1, m sets of inputs coming from the m polarity fields of the Instruction Register 1, one set of outputs O and a second set of outputs P. The multiplexer 32 being designed such that when the outputs of the binary counter provide the binary value i , the multiplexer provides to its set of outputs O the values present on its inputs coming from the field Oi of the Instruction Register 1, and to its set of outputs P the values coming from the field Pi of the Instruction Register 1. According to an aspect of the present invention, a comparator 43 compares the value stored in the field NO of the Instruction Register 1 against the value present on

the outputs of the binary counter 42. When the comparison matches the output of the comparator is activated high. This signal indicates the completion of the test operations over the current address. A D flip-flop 44 delays the output of the comparator 43. The output of this flip-flop 44 initializes the binary counter 42 to the 0 binary state. A second signal TS can be combined with the output of the flip-flop 44, by means of a logic gate 45, to generate the signal that initializes the binary counter 42. The signal TS is generated by a system external to the BIST circuitry (e.g. by the global test controller of a system on a chip (SOC), which sets the signal TS to 1 during a clock cycle, to activate the BIST hardware.

[0043] According to an aspect of the present invention, the clock of the Address Counter 73, counts once every $q+1$ clock cycles, where q is the binary value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register 1. According to an aspect of the present invention, the contents of the Address Counter are hold unchanged during q clock cycles where q is the binary value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register. According to an aspect of the present invention, the Address Counter 73 is controlled by a signal to be referred as the hold signal of the Address Counter. When this signal is active during a clock cycle, then, during the subsequent clock cycle the state of the Address Counter will be unchanged. According to an aspect of the present invention, the said hold signal of the Address Counter is generated by means of a comparator 43 and a counter 42. The comparator 43 compares the outputs of the counter 42 against the value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register 1. When the comparison does not match, the comparator provides on its output the active level of the hold signal, and when the comparison matches it provides on its output the non active level of the hold signal. According to an aspect of the present invention, the said hold signal of the Address Counter 73 is generated by using a flip-flop 44 to delay the output of the comparator 43 during one clock cycle. The output of the comparator is eventually inverted 78. According to an aspect of the present invention, the state of the Address Counter is hold unchanged when the value stored in the U/D field of the Instruction Register 1 during the present clock cycle is different than the value stored in this field during the previous clock cycle. According to an aspect of the present invention, the value stored in the U/D field of the Instruction Register 1 is loaded to a flip-flop 76 at each clock cycle. An EXCLUSIVE OR gate 77 receives on its inputs the input and the output of this flip-flop 76. The active level (i.e. the level 1) activates the said hold signal of the Address Counter. According to an aspect of the present invention, a logic circuit 79 combines the signal generated by the flip-flop 76 and the EXCLUSIVE OR gate 77 with the signal generated by the Counter 42, the comparator 43, the flip-flop 44 and the inverter 78, to generate the said hold signal of the Address Counter 73.

[0044] As we have seen, in march test algorithms, the memory can be addressed in two possible orders, a first

order said the up order and a second order said the down order. The address sequence corresponding to the up order will be said the up address sequence, and the address sequence corresponding to the down order will be said the down address sequence. According to an aspect of the present invention, the order (up or down) on which the addresses of the memory are generated during the test phase is determined by the contents of the U/D field of the Instruction Register 1. According to an aspect of the present invention, an input of the Address Counter 73, said the U/D control input of the Address Counter, determines on which order the Address Counter generates the memory addresses. According to an aspect of the present invention the output of the U/D field of the Instruction Register controls the said U/D control input of the Address Counter.

[0045] According to an aspect of the present invention, the contents of the Address Counter are initialized at the beginning of the test session, when the Instruction Register is loaded for the first time. According to an aspect of the present invention, the Address Counter is initialized to the first address of the up address sequence if the value loaded in the U/D field of the Instruction Register codes the up addressing order (e.g. value 1), and is initialized to the first address of the down address sequence if the value loaded in the U/D field of the Instruction register codes the down addressing order. According to an aspect of the present invention, the test session is activated by activating during one clock cycle a control signal TS (e.g. the value of TS is set to 1). According to an aspect of the present invention, a logic circuit 75 combines the signal TS and the input of the U/D field of the Instruction Register 1, and generates a first signal R that forces the Address Counter 73 to the first address of the up address sequence and a second signal S that forces the Address Counter to the first address of the down address sequence.

[0046] According to an aspect of the present invention, the Instruction Register is loaded once at the beginning of the test session and once each time the Address Counter provides at its outputs the last address of the address order determined by the value stored in the U/D field of the Instruction Register 1 and at the same time the state of a counter 42 matches the value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register. According to an aspect of the present invention, the contents of the Instruction Register 1 are hold unchanged during $(q+1)2^n - 1$ clock cycles where q is the binary value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register and 2^n is the number of addresses of the memory under test. According to an aspect of the present invention, the Instruction Register 1 is controlled by a signal to be said the hold signal of the Instruction Register. When this signal is active during a clock cycle, then, during the subsequent clock cycle the state of the Instruction Register will be unchanged.

[0047] According to an aspect of the present invention, a logic circuit 74 generates a first signal LU that is

active when the last address of the up address sequence is present on the outputs of the Address Counter 73, and a second signal LD that is active when the last address of the down address sequence is present on the outputs of the Address Counter 73. A logic circuit 82 combines the outputs LU and LD of the logic circuit 74, with the output of the U/D field of the Instruction Register 1 to generate a signal LM that is active only when the Address Counter 73 provides at its outputs the last address of the address sequence order specified by the value stored in the U/D address field of the Instruction Register 1. A logic circuit 83 combines the signal LM generated by the logic circuit 82 with a control signal TS, which activates the test phase, and with the output of a comparator 43 that compares the value stored in the NO field of the Instruction Register 1 against the outputs of a counter 42, to generate the said hold signal of the Instruction Register.

[0048] According to an aspect of the present invention, the Instruction Register 1 may include a field W, to be said the wait field. The inactive value (e.g. value 0) of this field leaves the BIST hardware to provide on the control signals of the memory the values corresponding to the operations specified in the operation fields of the Instruction Register 1. The active value of the wait field W of the Instruction Register 1 (e.g. the value 1) forces the BIST hardware to provide on the control signals of the memory under test a value that corresponds to a non operation cycle of the memory. For instance, if the memory uses a "Memory Enable" signal such that the value "Memory Enable" = 1 allows the memory to perform the operation specified in the R/W signal, while the value "Memory Enable" = 0 forces the memory in a non operation (or idle) cycle, then, the active value of the wait field of the Instruction Register 1 will force the "Memory Enable" signal to the value 0. According to an aspect of the present invention, the value stored in the wait field W of the Instruction Register 1 and the values stored the operation fields of the Instruction Register are combined by a circuit that provides on its outputs the actual values of the control signals of the memory under test. The function of this circuit is such that, for the active value of the wait field W of the Instruction Register 1 forces the control signals of the memory under test to the state that determines a non operation (or idle) memory cycle.

[0049] In addition to the march test algorithms, the BIST described in the present invention can be used to program wait phases of any given duration for detecting retention faults. This can be done by loading the Instruction Register several times with well selected values of the NO field and the W field. According an aspect of the present invention, to force the memory on a wait cycle (i.e. a cycle where no operations are performed on the memory) of a time duration D_p , we have to repeat Q_1 test sequences each of this sequence being specified by loading the Instruction Register 1 with values such that the field W is loaded with its active value and the

field NO is loaded with the binary value $2^s - 1$, followed by a test sequence specified by loading the Instruction Register 1 with values such that the field W is loaded with its active value and the field NO is loaded with the binary value Q_2 . Where s is the number of bits of the field NO of the Instruction Register 1, Q_1 is the quotient and R_1 is the rest of the division of D_p by $T_{ck} \times 2^s \times N_a$. N_a is the number of the memory addresses, T_{ck} is the clock period, Q_2 is the quotient of the division of R_1 by $T_{ck} \times N_a$.

[0050] According to an aspect of the present invention, the Address Counter can be implemented to have different operation modes, in addition to the up and down modes. For instance, the addresses in the up mode can be generated by using the column address bits as the LSB bits of the Address Counter and the row address bits as the MSB bits of the Address Counter. In this case, for a given value of the row address bits, all the values of the column address bits are generated before generating a new value in the row address bits. Another possibility is to use the row address bits as the LSB bits of the Address Counter and the column address bits as the MSB bits of the Address Counter. In order to be able to generate the address sequences in any of the above two modes, we can use a multiplexer which connects the outputs of the Address Counter to the address bits of the memory following the one or the other of the above connections according the values applied on the control signals of the multiplexer. Another possibility is to implement two counters, a column address counter for generating the values applied on the column address bits and a row address counter for generating the values applied on the row address bits. To implement the case where the column address bits are the LSB bits of the Address Counter, a signal detecting the 11...1 state in the column address counter will be used to activate the row address counter each time the column address counter is full. A similar connection can be used to implement the case where the row address bits have to be the LSB bits of the Address Counter. The memory can be organized in columns, rows, and blocks, and have column address bits, row address bits, and block address bits. As in the previous case we can have the column address bits as the less significant bits of the Address Counter, the row address bits as the mean significant bits of the Address counter, and the block address bits as the most significant bits of the Address Counter, or having any of the other 5 possible permutations for these bits. Again we can implement the Address Counter to allow any of these modes and use some control bits to determine which of these configurations is used at any given time. Other address generators modes can also be used. For instance the addresses can be generated in a step mode where the state of the Address Counter is increased (in up mode) or decreased (in down mode) by a constant value c. This can be done by implementing the Address Counter as an accumulator and apply the constant c on the one in-

put of the accumulator. The constant *c* can be programmed to allow a high flexibility. If the Address Counter is composed of several smaller counters as described above (e.g. column address counter, row address counter, ...), each of these counters can be implemented to perform the step mode.

[0051] According to an aspect of the present invention, the Address Counter 73 is implemented to have various operation modes in addition to the up and down modes, the selection of the operation mode of the Address Counter 73 is performed by means of a set of control bits, a @mode field (to be said the address mode field) is added to the Instruction Register 1. The value stored in the @mode field of the Instruction Register 1 determines the values of the control signals that select the operation mode of the Address Counter.

[0052] To program the BIST hardware to execute a march test algorithm, we will associate to each march sequence of the march test algorithm a march sequence instruction (to be referred hereafter as instruction). An instruction includes as many fields as the Instruction Register 1. The values of the different fields of an instruction correspond to the characteristics of the corresponding march sequence, such as addressing mode, number of operations, type of operations, data polarity, data vector. To start the march test algorithm we load in the Instruction Register 1 the instruction corresponding to the first march sequence of the march test algorithm. This is done by activating the signal TS during one clock cycle. Then, at the end of the first march sequence we load the second instruction to the Instruction Register. This instruction corresponds to the second march sequence of the march test algorithm. The load is activated automatically by the BIST hardware at the end of the first march sequence, but the second instruction must be present on the inputs of the Instruction Register 1 at the end of the first march sequence. Another possibility is to activate the loading by a signal generated by a circuit external to the BIST as was done for loading the first instruction. This process will be repeated as many times as the number of sequences of the march test algorithm. The instructions will be applied to the inputs of the Instruction Register by another circuit, for instance by a memory in which the instructions were stored previously. An interesting characteristic of the programmable BIST described by the present invention is that it uses only one instruction per march sequence. Thus, we can use a scan path 101 to shift the first instruction until the inputs of the Instruction Register 1, and activate the TS signal to load it in the Instruction Register. Then, during the period of the time that the BIST executes the first march sequence, we can use the scan path 101 to shift the second instruction until the inputs of the Instruction Register 1. This instruction will be maintained at inputs of the Instruction Register 1 until the end of the second march sequence, where it will be loaded in the Instruction Register 1. The signal that enables the loading of the instruction Register can be monitored by the system

that controls the scan path 101. Thus, when the second instruction is loaded in the Instruction Register the third instructions starts to be shifted through the scan path, and so on until the end of the test algorithm. Thus, the use of the scan path avoids the implementation of a memory for storing the instructions, and allows to program march test algorithms having any number of march sequences, while the use of a memory for storing the instructions limits the number of march sequences to the number memory words. This use of a scan path is not possible with the existing schemes of programmable BIST, since these schemes use a micro-programmable approach, where the frequent use of different microinstructions do not leave enough time for shifting them through a scan path. Not that in figure 1 we have use two different clock signals. The signal *ck* is used for the blocks of the BIST hardware. This hardware is implemented in the same chip as the memory, so it can be run at the same speed as the memory and the other blocks of the chip. Thus we can use the same clock for the BIST hardware and the other blocks of the chip. On the other hand, the signals shifted through the scan path can come from the board. In this case the scan path will be operated by a slow clock signal. Thus, in figure 1 we use a different clock signal for the scan path 101, the signal *Sck*.

[0053] We have seen that the programmable BIST described in this invention allows to program march test algorithms using any number of march sequences and any combination of operations within each march sequence. The only limitation concerns the maximum number of operations performed within a march sequence. This number is limited by the number *m* of the operation and polarity fields of the Instruction Register 1. However, all the known march test algorithms are composed of march sequences that use a small number of operations. Also, the cost of the hardware implementing the programmable BIST described in this invention is low. In addition, an increase of the number of the operation and polarity fields of the Instruction Register will only increase the hardware for implementing the Instruction Register 1 and the multiplexer 32. Thus, we can implement a programmable BIST with a number of operation and polarity fields higher than any practical test algorithm, by paying a very low hardware cost. For instance by using 16 operation and polarity bits, we will use an 32 bits in the Instruction Register 1 for these fields and we will also use a multiplexer 32 with 32 inputs and 2 outputs (in fact we will use two 1-out-of-16 multiplexers). Such an implementation will allow to cover all practical march test algorithms since the existing ones use few operations within the march sequences (one, two, three, or four operations most cases). In addition, we have seen that the programmable BIST proposed in this invention allows to program any wait time for testing retention faults. The following session will describe the implementation for programming any background.

4. Programmable Background BIST

[0054] An important limitation of the march test algorithms is the use of a single data word and its reverse during each march sequence. An important aspect of the present invention concerns the capability of a programmable BIST to use any test data during any cycle of the test process. However, such flexibility may require a large amount of test data and thus a large amount of memory for storing them. Implementing a BIST with such a large memory will require a very high hardware cost. To achieve this goal, we can use the external test equipment for providing the test data to the memory under test. There are two ways to apply test data to an embedded memory. The first uses a scan path and shifts the test data provided by the test equipment until the data inputs of the memory. However this requires a large number of shifts for applying each test data. It makes impossible to perform an efficient test, which will require applying one test vector per clock cycle. Another possibility is to create a direct connection between the circuit pads and the memory inputs. These can be done for instance by using some multiplexers. Thus, the external test equipment will be able to apply one test data per clock cycle. However, this test cannot be done at the normal operation speed of the memory, since the test data come from the board, and thus are much slower than the internal signals of an integrated circuit. One of the goals of the present invention is to conciliate the high flexibility offered by an external test approach with the test application at high speed offered by a BIST approach. According to an important aspect of the present invention, the test data are provided by an external test equipment during a first phase and the test algorithm is performed by the BIST hardware during a second phase. During the first phase the test equipment provides the test data by means of a serial access mechanism (i.e. scan path) or by means of a parallel access mechanism. This phase is eventually performed at low speed. Since during the test data provided during the first phase will be used as test data during the second phase, they have to be stored in the chip. In the worst case we will need a memory as large as the memory under test to store this data. To avoid implementing a second memory for storing the test data we will use one of the following approaches. There are exist two memories in the chip to be said memory 1 and memory 2. In this case, we will store the test data in the memory 1 during the first phase. During the second phase we will test the memory 2 by reading the data stored in the memory 1 and using them as test data for the memory 2. This will be done as following: we perform two algorithms in parallel on the two memories. The algorithm performed on the memory 2 is the test algorithm. The algorithm performed on the memory 1 (to be say the data source algorithm) can be derived from the test algorithm as follows :

1. The data source algorithms performs a read operation at any sequence the test algorithm performs a read operation. The read of the test algorithm and the read of the data source algorithm are performed over the same addresses. The data read in the data source algorithm will be used as a reference to check if the data read in the test algorithm are correct. However, if the read data are verified by means of a signature analysis we do not need such a reference. In this case we do not need to apply the present rule, and instead of a read we can perform a non-operation in the data source algorithm.
2. The data source algorithm performs a read operation at any cycle preceding a cycle that the test algorithm performs a write operation. The read in the data source algorithm will be performed on the same address as the write in the test algorithm.
3. At any other cycle the data source algorithm performs any operation that does not modify the state of the addressed location (e.g. a read, a write using as data the content of the addressed location, or a non operation).

[0055] The rules 1 and 2 are conflicting if the test algorithm performs at some time a read over a memory location followed by a write over a different memory location. For instance if the test algorithm performs at cycle i a read over a cell $C1$ and at cycle $i+1$ a write over a cell $C2$, then from rule 1 the data source algorithm must perform a read of the cell $C1$ at cycle i , and from rule 2 the data source algorithm must perform a read over the cell $C2$ again at cycle i . As a matter of fact, for algorithms in which the above conflict occurs, we eliminate the rule 1 by using a signature analyzer to verify the read. For algorithms that this conflict does not occur we can use either a comparator or a signature analyzer for verifying the read data. However, since we consider a programmable BIST approach for which any test algorithm must be covered, we will implement the present scheme by using a signature analyzer for verifying the read data. In this case, we can create the data source algorithm by using the rules 2 and 3.

[0056] A simpler way is to start performing the data source algorithm one cycle before the test algorithm. In this case we can create the data source algorithm in a much simpler manner. For doing so we will replace each write operation of the test algorithm by a read, and any other. This rule can be applied to any algorithm and can be used with both the scheme performing read data verification by using a signature analyzer, and the scheme performing this verification by using a comparator. Thus, this scheme is simpler and is applicable in all situations. Figure 2 illustrate this scheme.

[0057] According to an aspect of the present invention, the test data are loaded to a first memory (said memory 1), during a first phase (said the data load phase). Some access means such as a scan path chain 102 can be used to facilitate the transfer of the test data

to the inputs of the memory 1. A second memory (said memory 2 is tested during a second phase (said the test phase), by means of a test algorithm. During the test phase, the BIST hardware 301 of the memory 1 201 (said read-only BIST) is programmed to perform an algorithm obtained by replacing each write operation of the test algorithm by a read operation. The BIST hardware 302 of the memory 2 202 (said BIST) is programmed to perform the test algorithm. The read-only BIST 301 of the memory 1 201 is activated at cycle 0 by means of a control signal TS. The BIST 302 of the memory 2 201 is activated one cycle later than the read-only BIST 301 of the memory 1 201, by means of a signal TS+1. The data read from the memory 1 201 at any cycle are stored in a set of latches 401. The data stored in this set of latches are applied on the inputs of a set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402. Each EXCLUSIVE OR gate of the set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402 receives a first input from the output of a latch of the set of latches 402 and a second input from a polarity signal P generated by the BIST 302 of the memory 2 202. During a write operation to be performed over the memory 2 202, the outputs of the EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402 provide the data values to be written in the memory 2 202. During a read operation to be performed over the memory 2 202, a comparator 403 compares the data read from the memory 2 202 against the outputs of the set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402, to check the correctness of the read data.

[0058] The above process can be repeated by exchanging memory 1 and memory 2, in order to perform the test algorithm over memory 1.

[0059] When there is only one memory in a system, we can partition the memory in two blocks and implement them in a manner that allows operating the two blocks as independent memories. That is, during normal operation the two blocks can be used as a single memory, and during test the two blocks can be used as two independent memories. Thus, the BIST scheme described above can be used for this memory.

[0060] Another solution for using as test data for a memory the data supplied by an external test equipment at a low speed, and at the same time perform the test of the memory at a high speed, consists on using a first phase (to be said the data load phase) during which we load the test data in the memory, and a second phase (to be said the test phase) during which we test the memory by using as test data the contents of the memory itself. According to this technique we transform each test algorithm into an algorithm that allows using the memory data as test data. This is done thanks to the following transformation. We add a read operation in the beginning of each set of successive read and write operations performed over the same memory location and starting by a write. The goal of the other transformations used by the transparent BIST approach is to recover at the end of the test process the initial state of the memory. This goal is not of interest for the present invention. So,

we will use only the transformation described above. Thanks to this transformation, each set of consecutive operations performed over the same memory location start with a read. The data read from the memory at any cycle are stored in a latch. During any write, we use as data to be written in the memory the data stored in this latch, eventually by inverting them. Figure 3 illustrate this scheme.

[0061] According to an aspect of the present invention, the test data are loaded in the memory 203 by means of a test access mechanism 102 during a first phase. The BIST hardware 303 is programmed to perform a test algorithm in which each set of consecutive memory operations performed over the same memory address starts by a read. The data read from the memory 203 at any cycle are stored in a set of latches 401. The data stored in this set of latches are applied on the inputs of a set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402. Each EXCLUSIVE OR gate of the set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402 receives a first input from the output of a latch of the set of latches 402 and a second input from a polarity signal P generated by the BIST hardware 303. During a write operation performed over the memory 203, the outputs of the EXCLUSIVE OR gates 402 provide the data values to be written in the memory 203. The data read from the memory 203 at any read cycle are injected to a signature analyzer 404, which is used for verifying the correctness of the read data.

[0062] According an aspect of the present invention, two memories are tested concurrently by means of a first phase that load the test data to each of the memories, and by means of a second phase that applies a test algorithm to each memory, which uses the data loaded in each memory as test data for that memory as described above. According an aspect of the present invention, the data read from the two memories at any cycle are compared against each other for checking their correctness.

[0063] We can load the test data to the memory under test by means of a test access mechanism such as a scan path chain, and then use the BIST circuitry for applying a test algorithm, which uses the loaded data as test data. We can load and test the memory several times, in order to test it for several data backgrounds. We can use for that any data background of our choice.

For instance he can use the tiling method to determine several data backgrounds that load all the possible patterns to the four up, down, left and right neighbor cells of each memory cell, or to load the memory with another set of data backgrounds that load all the possible patterns to the eight neighbors of each cell, as described in the book entitled "Testing Semiconductor Memories, Theory and Practice", by A.J. van de Goor, John Wiley & Sons publisher, 1991. By comparing these backgrounds with selected march test algorithms we can test important classes of fault models, such as for instance the various classes of neighborhood pattern sensitive faults. If we use a scan path chain for loading the backgrounds, we have to convert each background into a se-

rial string that will be transferred to the inputs of the memory via the scan path. In memories using address scrambling, we have to consider the relationship between the physical location of the memory cells and the logical location within the address space. This we allow to load the memory with the adequate backgrounds without using a hardware block that employ the previous BIST approaches, in order to translate the logical address order generated by a BIST hardware to the physical address order corresponding to the physical location of the memory cells.

[0064] Beyond the significant advantages of the present invention, an important drawback concerns the long time required for loading the data backgrounds through a scan path. To reduce this time, we can use various techniques. The first technique considers the existence of a periodic structure in the data words used in many data backgrounds. Thus, for a memory using words of m bits, some backgrounds can use words having a period of k bits. In this case we will transfer through the scan path k bits in the place of each word of m bits, and we will expend these k bits into a word of m bits, similarly to the expansion shown in figure 1. This will reduce by a factor of m/k the number of bits to be transferred through the scan chain.

[0065] We can obtain a further reduction of the time involved by the data background loading, by exploiting a periodicity of the words used in many backgrounds. For backgrounds that repeat periodically the same data words, with a period equal to q , we can use an auxiliary memory having q words and load on this memory the q words forming the period of the background.

[0066] Then by reading repetitively the q words of the auxiliary memory, and writing them in the memory under test, we can load the latter with a data background having a period of q words. We can combine this technique with the technique using words of k bits instead of m bits. This scheme is illustrated in figure 4.

[0067] According to an aspect of the present invention, we use an auxiliary memory 501 composed of q words of k bits. During a first phase, the auxiliary memory is loaded with a set of q words of k bits each, by means of a test access mechanism 102 (e.g. a scan path). During a second phase, a counter 502 generates repetitively all the q addresses of the auxiliary memory 501, and a read operation is performed over each address of the auxiliary memory 501 generated by the counter 502. The k bits of the data read are expended to form words of m bits. At the same time, the BIST hardware 302 generates all the addresses of the memory under test 202, and at each cycle the expended form of the data read from the auxiliary memory 501 during the previous cycle is written in the memory under test 202. The counter 502, generates repetitively the addresses of the auxiliary memory as many times as necessary for loading the all the locations of the memory under test 202 with the data read from the auxiliary memory.

[0068] Another possibility is to consider the number

of words including in various backgrounds of interest. If M_b is the maximum number of words including at any of these backgrounds, we can implement an auxiliary memory with M_b words. Then, to load a background in the memory under test, we first load all the words of the background in the auxiliary memory, and then we load the background to the memory under test by using the words loaded in the auxiliary memory. However, the words of the auxiliary memory can be placed within the background at a rather arbitrary manner. In this case we will use the data path to address the auxiliary memory, in order to read the words of this memory in the order required for writing them in the memory under test. With this scheme we will need a number of $\lceil \log_2 q \rceil$ shifts for writing each word of the background in the memory under test. This scheme is illustrated in figure 5.

[0069] According to an aspect of the present invention, we use an auxiliary memory 601 composed of q words of k bits. During a first phase, the auxiliary memory is loaded with a set of q words of k bits each, by means of a test access mechanism 102 (e.g. a scan path). During a second phase, a second access mechanism 103 (e.g. a second scan path) is used to address the auxiliary memory at a desired order, and at each cycle a data is read from the address of the auxiliary memory 601 that is provided by the second access mechanism 103. The k bits of the data read are expended to form a word of m bits. At the same time, the BIST hardware 302 generates all the addresses of the memory under test 202, and at each cycle the expended form of the data read from the auxiliary memory 601 during the previous cycle is written in the memory under test 202. The process is repeated as many times as necessary for loading the all the locations of the memory under test 202 with the data read from the auxiliary memory.

[0070] The technique scheme using the scan path for writing the words of the background directly in the memory under test offers the highest flexibility, but requires the longest time for loading the backgrounds. This technique will be very desirable for debugging of new memory designs and for failure analysis, where the test time is not an important constraint and at the same time a high flexibility is required. On the other hand, test time reduction is a prime requirement in other situations such as manufacturing techniques. The techniques proposed for reducing the loading time will be essential in this case. In order to be able to choose the highest flexibility of the one method or the lower test time of the others, we can implement several of the solutions in a given design.

Claims

1. A programmable test system for a memory comprising:

an access mechanism (102) to load during a

first phase a set of test data in the memory under test (203),

a BIST hardware (303) to activate during a second phase a set of memory operations so that any set of consecutive memory operations performed over the same memory address starts by a read operation,

a set of latches (401) to store the data read from the memory (203) during any of said memory operations,

a set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates (402) having a first set of inputs coming from the outputs of said set of latches (401) and a second set of inputs coming from an output (P) of said BIST hardware (303), so that each EXCLUSIVE OR gate has a first input coming from one output of a latch of said set of latches (402), and a second input coming from said output (P) of the said BIST hardware (303),

wherein each write operation of said memory operations uses the values present on the outputs of said set of EXCLUSIVE OR gates (402) as data values to be written in the memory (203).

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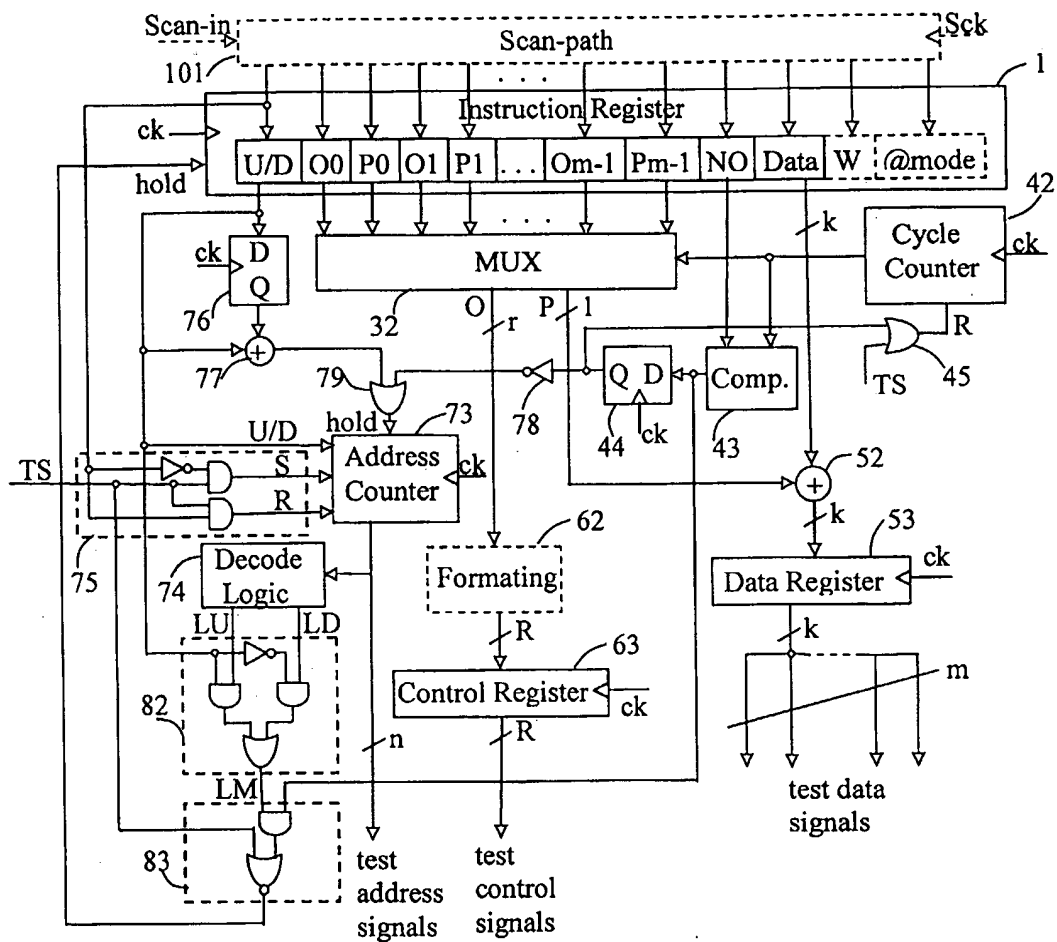


Fig. 1

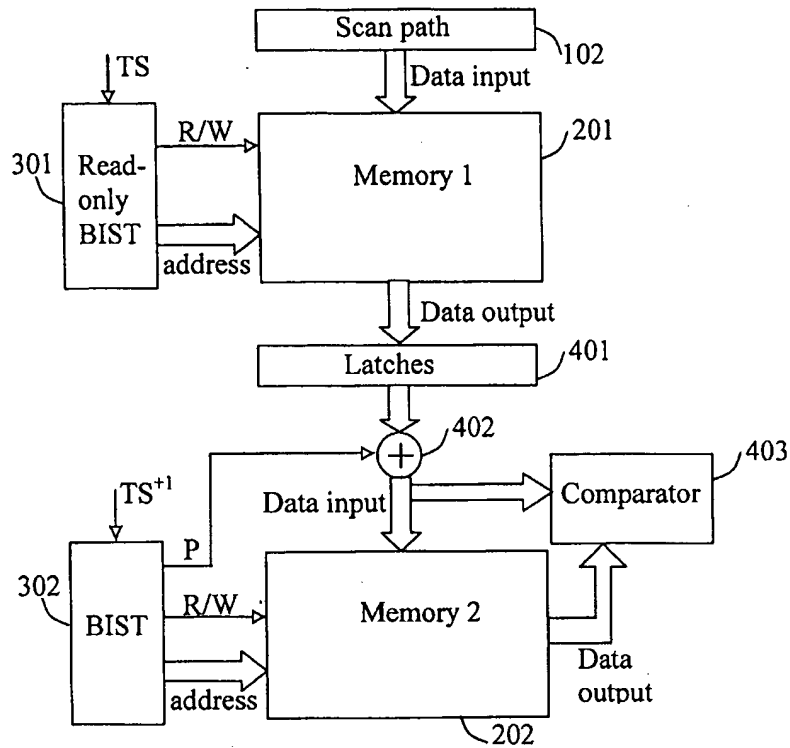


Fig. 2

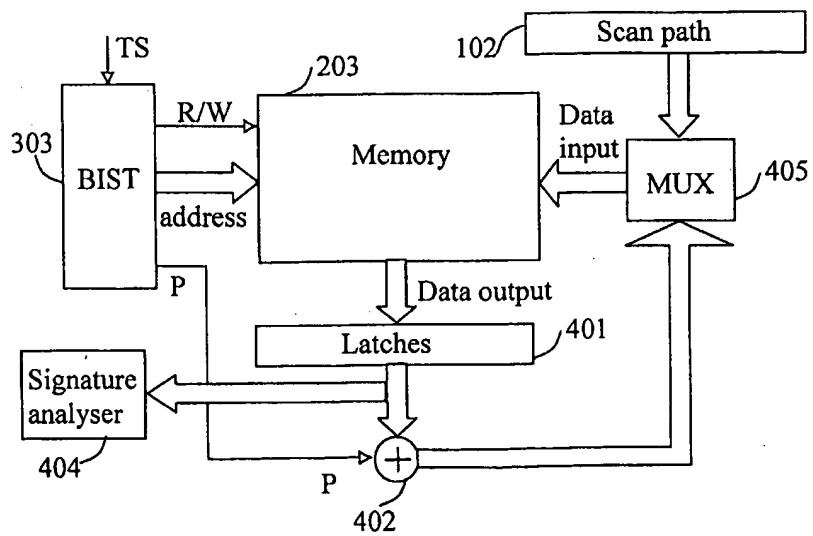


Fig. 3

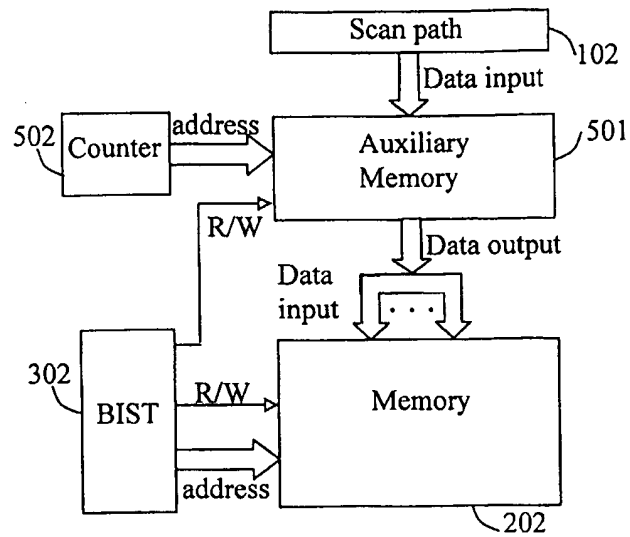


Fig. 4

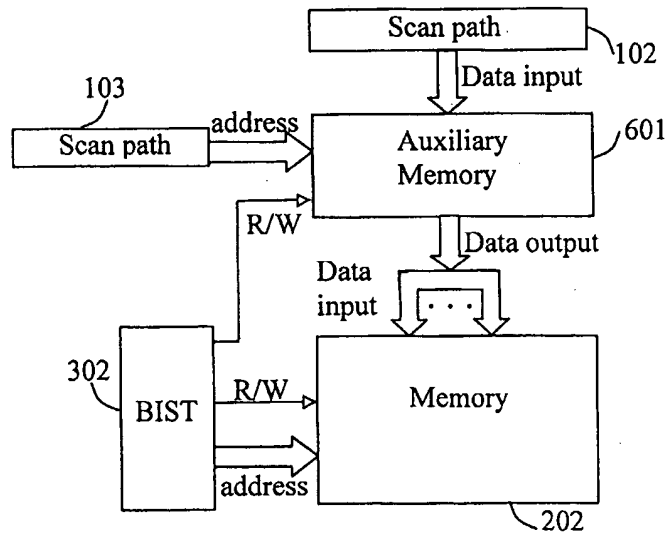


Fig. 5



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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
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The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 4 September 2002	Examiner Wolff, N
<p>CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS</p> <p>X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document</p> <p>T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document</p>			

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